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# BEETHOVEN'S VIOLIN SONATAS WITH JAMES EHNES



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# BEETHOVEN'S VIOLIN SONATAS WITH JAMES EHNES

INTIMATE COLLISIONS

**JAMES EHNES** violin  
**ANDREW ARMSTRONG** piano

## LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Violin Sonata No.1 in D major, Op.12 No.1

- i. *Allegro con brio*
- ii. *Tema con variazioni: andante con moto*
- iii. *Rondo: allegro*

Violin Sonata No.5 in F major, Op.24, 'Spring'

- i. *Allegro*
- ii. *Adagio molto espressivo*
- iii. *Scherzo: allegro molto*
- iv. *Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo*

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Violin Sonata No.9 in A major, Op.47, 'Kreutzer'

- i. *Adagio sostenuto – Presto*
- ii. *Andante con variazioni I-IV*
- iii. *Finale: Presto*

Pre-concert talk by Rosie  
Gallagher in the Northern  
Foyer at 1:15.

## ESTIMATED DURATIONS

20 minutes, 23 minutes,  
interval 20 minutes,  
35 minutes

The concert will conclude  
at approximately 4pm.

## COVER IMAGE

James Ehnes.  
Photo credit Benjamin  
Ealovega.

*James Ehnes' performances with Sydney Symphony Orchestra  
have been generously supported in memory of Dr Charles Frater.*

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# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## JAMES EHNES violin

James Ehnes has established himself as one of the most sought-after musicians on the international stage. Gifted with a rare combination of stunning virtuosity, serene lyricism and an unfaltering musicality, Ehnes is a favourite guest at the world's most celebrated concert halls.

Recent orchestral highlights include the MET Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, San Francisco Symphony, London Symphony, NHK Symphony and Munich Philharmonic. Throughout the 22/23 season, Ehnes continues as Artist in Residence with the National Arts Centre of Canada.

Alongside his concerto work, Ehnes maintains a busy recital schedule. He performs regularly at the Wigmore Hall (including the complete cycle of Beethoven Sonatas in 2019/20, and the complete violin/viola works of Brahms and Schumann in 2021/22), Carnegie Hall, Symphony Center Chicago, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Ravinia, Montreux, Verbier Festival, Dresden Music Festival and Festival de Pâques in Aix. A devoted chamber musician, he is the leader of the Ehnes Quartet and the Artistic Director of the Seattle Chamber Music Society.

Ehnes has an extensive discography and has won many awards for his recordings, including two Grammys, one Gramophone Award and eleven Juno Awards. In 2021, Ehnes was announced as the recipient of the coveted Artist of the Year title in the 2021 Gramophone Awards which celebrated his recent contributions to the recording industry, including the launch of a new online recital series entitled 'Recitals from Home' which was released in June 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent closure of concert halls. Ehnes recorded the six Bach Sonatas and Partitas and six Sonatas of Ysaÿe from his home with state-of-the-art recording equipment and released six episodes over the period of two months. These recordings have been met with great critical acclaim by audiences worldwide and Ehnes was described by *Le Devoir* as being "at the absolute forefront of the streaming evolution".

Ehnes began violin studies at the age of five, became a protégé of the noted Canadian violinist Francis Chaplin aged nine, and made his orchestra debut with L'Orchestre symphonique de Montréal aged 13. He continued his studies with Sally Thomas at the Meadowmount School of Music and The Juilliard School, winning the Peter Mennin Prize for Outstanding Achievement and Leadership in Music upon his graduation in 1997. He is a Member of the Order of Canada and the Order of Manitoba, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and an honorary fellow of the Royal Academy of Music, where he is a Visiting Professor.

Ehnes plays the "Marsick" Stradivarius of 1715.

*James Ehnes' performances with Sydney Symphony Orchestra have been generously supported in memory of Dr Charles Frater.*



James Ehnes, photo by Benjamin Ealovega

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **ANDREW ARMSTRONG** piano

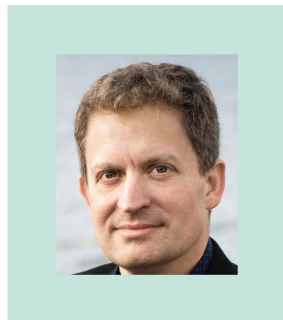
Praised by critics for his passionate expression and dazzling technique, pianist Andrew Armstrong has delighted audiences across Asia, Europe, Latin America, Canada, and the United States, including performances at Alice Tully Hall, Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, and Warsaw's National Philharmonic.

Andrew's orchestral engagements across the globe have seen him perform a sprawling repertoire of more than 55 concertos with orchestra. He has performed with such conductors as Peter Oundjian, Itzhak Perlman, Günther Herbig, Stefan Sanderling, Jean-Marie Zeitouni, and Stanislaw Skrowaczewski, and has appeared in chamber music concerts with the Elias, Alexander, American, and Manhattan String Quartets, and also as a member of the Caramoor Virtuosi, Boston Chamber Music Society, Seattle Chamber Music Society, and the Jupiter Symphony Chamber Players.

The 2021-2022 season has taken Andy throughout Europe with performances in Glasgow at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, London at Wigmore Hall, Geneva at the Conservatoire de Musique de Geneve and at the Dresden Music Festival. He crisscrossed Canada with concerts in Halifax, Nova Scotia at the Scotia Fest, Montreal at the Festival Musique de Chambre and Vancouver at the Vancouver Chamber Music Society.

In addition to directing Chamber Music on Main at the Columbia Museum of Art (SC) and the Chamber Music Camp at Green Lake Festival of Music (WI), Andrew is devoted to outreach programs and playing for children. In addition to his many concerts, his performances are heard regularly on National Public Radio and WQXR, New York City's premier classical music station.

Mr. Armstrong lives in Massachusetts, with his wife Esty, their three children Jack (14), Elise (9), and Gabriel (2), and their two dogs Comet & Dooker.



Andrew Armstrong, photo  
by Benjamin Ealovega

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Beethoven must have known he was on the right track. According to one critic, the three Violin Sonatas, Op.12, displayed ‘a forced attempt at strange modulations, an aversion to the conventional key relationships, a piling up of difficulty on difficulty’. By 1798 Beethoven had outgrown his status as a pupil of Haydn, but continued studying. His teacher of dramatic and vocal composition was Antonio Salieri. In due course Beethoven and Salieri fell out, but in 1798 they were still friends, and Beethoven dedicated Op.12 to him.

It is hard to imagine what critics found so confronting. The sonatas are in the conventional three-movement design of the time with a sonata-form first movement, a slow expressive central movement and a sparkling rondo finale, but they do foreshadow certain characteristics of the music to come. The **first Sonata** begins in austerity, where both instruments state, in unison, variants on a single three-note motif – generating music out of minimal material would become integral to works like the Fifth Symphony. The first subject ‘proper’ is a melody, defined by a leaping octave and falling arpeggio, announced by the violin and then restated, ornamented, by the piano. The second subject group begins with the violin’s pattern of thirds and seconds against the piano’s bell-like triplets, then a melody dominated by the rising octave and falling, stepwise figures. The central development – short by late-classical, let alone late Beethovenian, standards – is ushered in by a series of soft chords and, unusually, is in F major. (The use of keys a third apart would become more and more a feature of Beethoven’s work.) The development is given over to delicate textures of even quavers from violin with liquid upward arpeggio figures from piano. Again, a tendency to withdraw into delicate textures and even silence becomes a Beethovenian hallmark; here it is dramatically interrupted by the forceful recapitulation of the opening material.



Beethoven in 1804



# ABOUT THE MUSIC



Antonio Salieri, dedicatee of Op.12

Maynard Solomon writes of the prevalence of infinitely extensible variation movements in late Beethoven that it is a form 'in flight from ideology...fate cannot knock at the door in variation form.' The slow movement of this sonata is a kind of preview of those later variations in which a theme is not so much varied as transfigured. The eight-bar *Andante* theme in A is deceptively simple, with chromatic semitones in its second half that 'push' it towards sharper keys. The first and second variations feature the piano and violin respectively; in the third minor-key variation we glimpse something of the profound feeling of the later music, as we do in the serenely beautiful fourth variation.

Beethoven dispenses with a return to the theme, forging ahead into the mandatory rondo finale in a rollicking 6/8. He develops and varies the rondo theme at each statement – swapping voices, and unexpectedly changing key. In the episodes between statements of the rondo, he explores F major and, more conventionally, B minor, and writes a highly chromatic coda that seems to make it back to D major only just in time.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

The first three years of the 19th century were amazingly productive for Beethoven, despite – or perhaps because of – the deep emotional turmoil unleashed by the realisation that his deafness was permanent and incurable. As he wrote in the 1802 document known now as the *Heiligenstadt Testament* Beethoven considered suicide, ‘but my art held me back’. Resolving to take fate by the throat, he plunged into a period of sustained creativity.

As so often in Beethoven, the **F major Violin Sonata** is one of a pair of works, like the Quartets Opp.74 and 95, or the odd and even numbered symphonies, that contrast extreme expansiveness with extreme compression. Its immediate predecessor, the A minor Sonata, Op.23, is a much shorter, more concentrated work. The larger scale and opulent sound of this F major account for its nickname (not conferred by the composer).

The expansiveness of the piece is heard in the opening theme from the violin, with its motif of long notes that dissolve into rapid semiquavers. The tune is so ornate that Beethoven reverses the conventional idea of the ‘contrasting lyrical second theme’: the subject here consists of long notes in the violin, that eventually produce a chirping motif, and full emphatic patterns of chords from the piano.

The pattern of long note followed by a flourish continues on the Adagio, where it is given by the piano over a hypnotic bass, while the violin, at first, offers short isolated motifs. Beethoven had, after all, inherited the 18th century ‘accompanied sonata’ where the melody instrument is often used merely for reinforcement of the piano’s right hand material. Of course, here the material becomes ever more ornate, and the instruments ever more intertwined.

In another radical departure from the 18th century model, Beethoven inserts a scherzo as the third movement. Its main material is terse, to say the least, with a simple rhythmic staccato pattern. In contrast, the central Trio section fills in the gaps with a constant stream of scales.



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Conventionally enough, the last movement is a rondo, with a main theme, sounded first by the piano and then by the violin, which has the ring of a Viennese popular song. The interspersed episodes contrast with it, but Beethoven being Beethoven the main material is varied and developed on each appearance before a brilliant coda brings together motifs from earlier parts of the movement.



Rodolphe Kreutzer, by Riedel

The **'Kreutzer' Sonata** should, by rights, be known as the 'Bridgetower' Sonata. The French violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer (1766–1830), who gives the piece its nickname, was one of the great virtuosos of the late 18th century, as well as being a composer of some distinction and a successful music publisher. He and Beethoven met in 1804, when, as the composer put it in a letter to his publisher, this 'good, dear fellow... gave me much enjoyment when he was here – his modesty and his natural ways appeal to me much more than all the exterieur or interieur of most virtuosos'. In this letter Beethoven importunes his publisher to hurry up with the production of his A major sonata so that he can send a copy to Kreutzer. The gift of the score and its dedication would be a huge, and not entirely welcome, surprise to the violinist.

## ABOUT THE MUSIC



George Polgreen Bridgetower

The work had its premiere in Vienna in 1803 with the violinist for whom it was written. George Polgreen Bridgetower (1778-1860) was born in Poland. His West Indian father was in the service of Haydn's employer Prince Nicholas Esterházy; George probably knew Haydn and possibly studied with him. As a ten-year-old child he made his debut as a violinist in Paris, and then moved to London where he performed and composed as 'The Son of the African Prince' before finally becoming first violinist to the Prince of Wales (later George IV).

Composed in 1803, Beethoven's Sonata is part of that amazing flowering of his genius in the wake of the crisis of the previous year, when the composer realised that his deafness was permanent and would worsen, and contemplated suicide. It was evidently written in some haste – the finale is a 'spare' that Beethoven had decided not to use in an

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

earlier work, and we know that at the work's premiere that Bridgetower had to practically sight-read at least some of the piece. But what a contemporary described as a 'not very full but select audience' relished the piece. Bridgetower himself describes how 'Beethoven's expression in the Andante was so chaste, always a characteristic of the execution of his slow movements, that everyone unanimously demanded that the passage be repeated twice.

In a burst of affectionate political incorrectness, Beethoven titled the manuscript (in Italian) 'Mulattic Sonata: Composed for the mulatto Brischdauer, great lunatic and mulattic composer'. But on its official title page he describes it as being 'in a very concertante style, almost like a concerto'. Its first movement is broadly conceived, with a slow introduction to generate expectant tension before the main argument. The second makes a theme and only four variations last an astonishing 15 minutes, while the finale is a joyful and wonderfully unaffected dance. In its scale, rhetorical force and breadth of musical manners – to say nothing of the artistry required from both performers – this sonata is unlike anything that went before.

Bridgetower must have been quite a player, and was no doubt equal to the amazing technical demands of the work: the arresting double stopping of the opening, for instance, or the glittering, multi-octave arpeggio writing in the slow movement. Beethoven was pleased, according to the violinist, leaping up to embrace him after a particularly wrist-breaking passage and saying, 'my dear boy'.

The relationship was clearly a warmly affectionate one, and Beethoven, despite the casual racism and questionable taste of his dedication, seems to have taken Bridgetower to the homes and salons of his aristocratic patrons several times. But there was a falling out – legend has it they fought 'over a girl', so Beethoven tore out the dedication and inscribed the work to Kreutzer, who never played it.

# JAMES EHNES AND ANDREW ARMSTRONG: PLAYING FAVOURITES

These two old friends and musical partners share a deep and intimate connection on-stage and off – but even they can't agree on which of the Beethoven Violin Sonatas is their favourite.

*Written by Hugh Robertson*

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Canadian violinist James Ehnes and American pianist Andrew Armstrong have spent the last several years steeped in Beethoven's musical world. The pair have been musical partners for many years, playing a wide range of repertoire, and since 2017 have recorded all ten of Beethoven's magnificent Violin Sonatas. These recordings have won a host of awards and been widely praised, the French magazine *Diapason* writing that Armstrong and Ehnes "converse as equals, underpinned by an irreproachable technique."

In conversation, Ehnes seems almost ensorcelled by the works, as though he can't quite put his finger on what makes them so magical. As with so much of Beethoven's output, the works are stunning to hear, but once you get under the hood as a performer they reveal ever more intricacy.

"Andy and I would joke as we played them that whichever one we were playing at that moment, we would get the sneaking suspicion that was our favourite," says Ehnes with a laugh. "And then we would move onto the next one, and say, 'Oh, no, it's got to be this one.'"

They are mostly reasonably early pieces, and yet I feel that each one of them really has something quite magical and special about it. I could talk about any one of them and tell you — and hopefully be convincing — about why it is an important piece."

"If you were to point to a pivot in Beethoven's compositional life, it would be No.10, Op.96. If you were to talk about a piece of high Romantic, virtuosic excess, you would point at the Ninth Sonata. And if you had to pick one sonata that really changed the genre into a true large-scale duo format, then it would probably be the First Sonata, Op.12 No.1."



# JAMES EHNES AND ANDREW ARMSTRONG: PLAYING FAVOURITES

“Beethoven was not one to ease into anything. If you think of the Op. 12 sonatas, the Op. 1 trios, the Op. 2 piano sonatas, the Op. 5 cello sonatas — the very first example that he did in any genre was longer, more complicated, more virtuosic, and just *more* than anything that came before it.

When we think of Beethoven we think of the great pianist-composer, sawing the legs off his instrument so he could feel the vibrations as his hearing continued to fail. But the magic of the Violin Sonatas is that both pianist and violinist are stretched to their limits — and are often called upon to play like the other.

“They are so incredibly challenging from an interpretive standpoint, and from a technical standpoint too: first, the interpretive question is, ‘When are the instruments imitative, and when are they complementary?’ Because of course, fundamentally, they are very, very different, but clearly sometimes he is asking for very direct imitation. And to play the piano like a violin — or to play the violin like a piano — is not easy!

“There are times, particularly in the *Kreutzer*, where he is writing so specifically music for a violin, or music for a piano, and the way that he will write things in different ways for the two instruments. But then you think of some of the early sonatas, where they are so imitative. And I think of some of the magical things that Andy has done with those parts, where he has really paid attention to some of the incredibly intricate articulation that is written into the piano parts, to be played like bowings — as if it wasn’t complicated enough!”

“We talk about that a lot when we are rehearsing. There will be things where an attack on the piano has to be a certain way, and if the violin is going to imitate that you have to understand that. And similarly, there are things where we are trying to find the key to pianistic articulation, and I have to say, ‘Andy, you have to play it like it is a bowing’ — because it is! It’s a bowing for a non-bowed instrument, how impractical is that?”

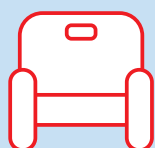
“Andrew has said that there are things in these violin sonatas that he finds to be more difficult than any of the piano sonatas. It’s just great stuff, and I never tire of them.”

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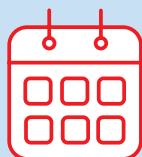
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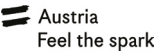
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